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Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT THE WHITE HOUSE TRIBAL NATIONS CONFERENCE

Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C.

9:39 A.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you very much. Thank you very much. Everybody please be seated. Thank you.

Thank you, Fawn, for that wonderful introduction. Thanks to all of you. It is wonderful to be with you here today.

I see a lot of friends, a lot of familiar faces in the house. I want to thank all the tribal leaders who have traveled here for this conference. And I also want to recognize all the wonderful members of Congress who are here, as well as members of my Cabinet, including Secretary Salazar, who is doing terrific work here at Interior on behalf of the First Americans and on behalf of all Americans. So thank you very much, everybody. (Applause.)

Yesterday, I had the chance to meet with several tribal leaders at the White House, continuing a conversation that began long before I was President. And while I'm glad to have the opportunity to speak with you this morning, I'm also very eager to see the results of today's meeting. I want to hear more from you about how we can strengthen the relationship between our governments, whether in education or health care, or in fighting crime or in creating jobs.

And that's why we're here today. That's a promise I've made to you. I remember, more than two years ago, in Montana, I visited the Crow Nation -- one of the many times I met with tribal leaders on the campaign trail. You may know that on that trip, I became an adopted Crow Indian. My Crow name is "One Who Helps People Throughout the Land." (Applause.) And my wife, when I told her about this, she said, "You should be named 'One Who Isn't Picking Up His Shoes and His Socks'." (Laughter.)

Now -- but I like the first name better. And I want you to know that I'm working very hard to live up to that name.

What I said then was that as President I would make sure that you had a voice in the White House. (Applause.) I said that so long as I held this office, never again would Native Americans be forgotten or ignored. (Applause.) And over the past two years, my administration, working hand in hand with many of you, has strived to keep that promise. And you've had strong partners in Kim Teehee, my senior advisor for Native American issues, and Jodi Gillette, in our Intergovernmental Affairs office. You can give them a big round of applause. They do outstanding work. (Applause.)

Last year, we held the largest gathering of tribal leaders in our history. And at that conference -- you remember, most of you were there -- I ordered every Cabinet agency to promote more consultation with the tribal nations. Because I don't believe that the solutions to any of our problems can be dictated solely from Washington. Real change depends on all of us doing our part.

So over the past year my administration has worked hard to strengthen the relationship between our nations. And together, we have developed a comprehensive strategy to help meet the challenges facing Native American communities.

Our strategy begins with the number one concern for all Americans right now -- and that's improving the economy and creating jobs. We've heard time and again from tribal leaders that one of the keys to unlocking economic growth on reservations is investments in roads and high-speed rail and high-speed Internet and the infrastructure that will better connect your communities to the broader economy. That's essential for drawing capital and creating jobs on tribal lands. So to help spur the economy, we've boosted investment in roads throughout the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Reservation Road Program, and we've offered new loans to reach reservations with broadband.

And as part of our plan to revive the economy, we've also put billions of dollars into pressing needs like renovating schools. We're devoting resources to job training -- especially for young people in Indian Country who too often have felt like they don't have a chance to succeed. And we're working with you

to increase the size of tribal homelands in order to help you develop your economies.

I also want to note that I support legislation to make clear -- in the wake of a recent Supreme Court decision -- that the Secretary of Interior can take land into trust for all federally recognized tribes. (Applause.) That's something that I discussed yesterday with tribal leaders.

We're also breaking down bureaucratic barriers that have prevented tribal nations from developing clean energy like wind and solar power. It's essential not just to your prosperity, but to the prosperity of our whole country. And I've proposed increasing lending to tribal businesses by supporting community financial institutions so they can finance more loans. It is essential in order to help businesses expand and hire in areas where it can be hard to find credit.

Another important part of our strategy is health care. We know that Native Americans die of illnesses like diabetes, pneumonia, flu -- even tuberculosis -- at far higher rates than the rest of the population. Make no mistake: These disparities represent an ongoing tragedy. They're cutting lives short, causing untold pain and hardship for Native American families. And closing these gaps is not just a question of policy, it's a question of our values -- it's a test of who we are as a nation.

Now, last year, at this conference, tribal leaders talked about the need to improve the health care available to Native Americans, and to make quality insurance affordable to all Americans. And just a few months later, I signed health reform legislation into law, which permanently authorizes the Indian Health Care Improvement Act -- permanently. (Applause.) It's going to make it possible for Indian tribes and tribal organizations to purchase health care for their employees, while making affordable coverage available to everybody, including those who use the Indian Health Service -- that's most American Indians and native -- Alaska Natives. So it's going to make a huge difference.

Of course, there are few steps we can take that will make more of a difference for the future of your communities than improving education on tribal lands. We've got to improve the education we provide to our children. That's the cornerstone on which all of our progress will be built. We know that Native Americans are far more likely to drop out of high school and far

less likely to go to college. That not only damages the prospects for tribal economies; it's a heartbreaking waste of human potential. We cannot afford to squander the promise of our young people. Your communities can't afford it, and our country can't afford it. And we are going to start doing something about it. (Applause.)

We're rebuilding schools on tribal lands while helping to ensure that tribes play a bigger role in determining what their children learn. We're working to empower parents with more and better options for schools for their kids -- as well as with support programs that actually work with Indian parents to give them a real voice in improving education in your communities.

We're also working to improve the programs available to students at tribal colleges. Students who study at tribal colleges are much less likely to leave college without a degree and the vast majority end up in careers serving their tribal nation. And these schools are not only helping to educate Native Americans; they're also helping to preserve rich but often endangered languages and traditions. I'd also like to point out last year I signed historic reforms that are increasing student aid and making college loans more affordable. That's especially important to Native Americans struggling to pay for a college degree. (Applause.)

Now, all these efforts -- improving health care, education, the economy -- ultimately these efforts will not succeed unless all of our communities are safe places to grow up and attend school and open businesses and where people are not living under the constant threat of violence and crime. And that threat remains real, as crime rates in Indian Country are anywhere from twice to 20 times the national average. That's a sobering statistics -- represents a cloud over the future of your communities.

So the Justice Department, under the leadership of Eric Holder, is working with you to reform the way justice is done on Indian reservations. And I was proud to sign the Tribal Law and Order Act into law, which is going to help tribes combat drug and alcohol abuse, to have more access to criminal databases, and to gain greater authority to prosecute and punish criminals in Indian Country. That's important. (Applause.)

We've also resolved a number of longstanding disputes about the ways that our government has treated -- or in some cases

mistreated -- folks in Indian Country, even in recent years. We've settled cases where there were allegations of discrimination against Native American farmers and ranchers by the Department of Agriculture. And after a 14-year battle over the accounting of tribal resources in the Cobell case, we reached a bipartisan agreement, which was part of a law I signed just a week ago. We're very proud of that and I want to thank all the legislators who helped make that happen. (Applause.)

This will put more land in the hands of tribes to manage or otherwise benefit their members. This law also includes money to settle lawsuits over water rights for seven tribes in Arizona, Montana and New Mexico -- and it creates a scholarship fund so more Native Americans can afford to go to college.

These cases serve as a reminder of the importance of not glossing over the past or ignoring the past, even as we work together to forge a brighter future. That's why, last year, I signed a resolution, passed by both parties in Congress, finally recognizing the sad and painful chapters in our shared history -- a history too often marred by broken promises and grave injustices against the First Americans. It's a resolution I fully supported -- recognizing that no statement can undo the damage that was done; what it can do is help reaffirm the principles that should guide our future. It's only by heeding the lessons of our history that we can move forward.

And as you know, in April, we announced that we were reviewing our position on the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. And today I can announce that the United States is lending its support to this declaration. (Applause.)

The aspirations it affirms -- including the respect for the institutions and rich cultures of Native peoples -- are one we must always seek to fulfill. And we're releasing a more detailed statement about U.S. support for the declaration and our ongoing work in Indian Country. But I want to be clear: What matters far more than words -- what matters far more than any resolution or declaration -- are actions to match those words. And that's what this conference is about. (Applause.) That's what this conference is about. That's the standard I expect my administration to be held to.

So we're making progress. We're moving forward. And what I hope is that we are seeing a turning point in the relationship

between our nations. The truth is, for a long time, Native Americans were implicitly told that they had a choice to make. By virtue of the longstanding failure to tackle wrenching problems in Indian Country, it seemed as though you had to either abandon your heritage or accept a lesser lot in life; that there was no way to be a successful part of America and a proud Native American.

But we know this is a false choice. To accept it is to believe that we can't and won't do better. And I don't accept that. I know there is not a single person in this room who accepts that either. We know that, ultimately, this is not just a matter of legislation, not just a matter of policy. It's a matter of whether we're going to live up to our basic values. It's a matter of upholding an ideal that has always defined who we are as Americans. E pluribus unum. Out of many, one.

That's why we're here. That's what we're called to do. And I'm confident that if we keep up our efforts, that if we continue to work together, that we will live up to the simple motto and we will achieve a brighter future for the First Americans and for all Americans.

So thank you very much. God bless you. Thank you.
(Applause.)

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9:54 A.M. EST